



# Social capital at different levels and dimensions: a typology of social capital

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## Abstract

Social capital can have different meanings depending on the conceptual approach adopted by the researcher or practitioner using the term. This can create confusion and contradiction when unwitting scholars mix and match definitions, conceptualisations, and methodologies from different approaches. This is further complicated by the fact that social capital can be analysed from the micro to the macro level and applied to a wide range of different contexts across virtually every area of the social sciences. This article presents a typology of social capital dimensions at different levels of analysis with the goal to assist students and scholars to make sense of the many conceptualisations and theoretical treatments of social capital in the literature.

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## Introduction

Social capital has been criticised for being incredibly broad and potentially related to everything, a kind of catch-all (Huber, 2009). It is often treated differently in different contexts and at different levels of analysis. Some authors treat social capital as a private good, some as a public good, and others as having both private and public good characteristics (Alguezaui & Filieri, 2010). For some scholars, it relates only to social relationships, while for others, it extends to social setting and social structures. There are scholars who conceptualise social capital as it relates to resources, while others take the capital metaphor further to consider a range of tangible and intangible benefits of sociability.

There have been some excellent attempts to order the chaos created by these diverse approaches to social capital and frequent poor scholarship (for further details see Claridge, 2018). It has become common to differentiate between different approaches, different dimensions, different types and different levels, but confusion and contradiction continues to reign in much of the literature (Rostila, 2011). These differences can present a significant challenge for researchers and practitioners who are new to social capital. To maintain theoretical rigour, it is vital to distinguish between different approaches to avoid mixing and matching definitions, conceptualisations, and methodologies from distinct approaches. This can be a difficult task, even for experienced scholars.

This article aims to assist students and scholars to make sense of the many conceptualisations and theoretical treatments of social capital in the literature. This will be useful to anyone who is new to social capital and may provide experienced social capital scholars with an opportunity for reflection and elucidation. This article attempts to distinguish phenomena at different levels of analysis and their relationship to different dimensions of social capital. This can allow scholars to position their research within this broad typology and improve their understanding of how their chosen approach overlaps and contrasts with other theoretical approaches.

## Dimensions of social capital and levels of analysis

In recent years there has been some agreement in the literature that social capital relates to networks, trust and norms (Halstead & Deller, 2015). Despite extremely diverse views, there has been a coalescing of agreement around these three components with most definitions including some form of all three (Claridge, 2020). These components are often articulated more rigorously with the terminology structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, there is still little understanding of how these dimensions relate to different levels of analysis<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) defined social capital as the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Their approach therefore focused on the individual level and treated social capital as a private good. Following authors have applied the dimensions to different approaches and contexts at different levels of analysis with little consideration to its appropriateness.

It is also commonly accepted that social capital is conceptualised differently at different levels of analysis and that these levels are highly interrelated (Halpern, 2005). This is based on a well-established tradition in sociological analysis of micro, meso and macro levels. In sociology it is common for micro level analysis to consider society as made up of individuals, for meso to consider society as made up of social relations, and for macro analysis to consider society as made up of collective aggregates (Tronca, 2011).

In the context of social capital these levels could be interpreted in different ways, depending on whether social capital is treated as exclusively involving social relationships or also including broader social setting and structure.

For authors who treat social capital as exclusively involving social relationships, levels tend to be seen as relationships on different geographical scale (for example Chen, 2005; Halpern, 2005; Yasunobu & Bhandari, 2009). From this perspective, micro level refers to relations between individuals, the meso level refers to relations between groups or firms, and the macro level refers to relations between regions or nations.

For authors who treat social capital as social

relationships and broader social setting and structure, levels also relate to scale, but not necessarily geographic scale. From this perspective, micro level factors relate to or are embedded in social relationships, meso level factors are applicable in the context of a social grouping, and macro level factors are generally relevant and widely applicable to a community or society. This is the approach taken in this article.

The concept of social capital has the potential to integrate micro and macro analysis (Coleman, 1990; Field, Schuller, & Baron, 2000), however, the bodies of research stemming from micro and macro viewpoints are largely disconnected (Payne, Moore, Griffis, & Autry, 2011). These viewpoints could be termed 'network' and 'normative' respectively. There have been some attempts to differentiate these approaches with the use of different terms. For example, some authors refer to the macro level social capital as *civic capital* (Adam, 2011; Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2010; Membiela-Pollán & Pena-López, 2017). This can be either authors who take the micro approach and want to distinguish their version of social capital from the macro perspective, or macro perspective authors who want to separate their conceptual framework from that of the network approach. The micro level is sometimes referred to as

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Structural dimension</b>	<b>Relational dimension</b>	<b>Cognitive dimension</b>
<b>Level</b>	Configuration and pattern of social relationships including structures of social organisation	Characteristics and qualities of social relationships	Shared understandings that provide systems of meaning
<b>Micro</b> Factors related to, or embedded in, specific social relationships	Social networks Bonding ties Bridging ties Linking ties Network configuration Associational membership <i>Similar to connectedness</i>	Thick trust and trustworthiness Norms and sanctions Obligations and expectations Identity and identification <i>Similar to reputation and goodwill</i>	Shared language, codes, and narratives Shared values, attitudes, and beliefs Shared goals and purpose
<b>Meso</b> Factors that are applicable in the context of a social grouping	Roles (formal and informal) Rules (formalised and informal) Procedures and precedents Networks of institutions	The relational dimension is generally not applicable above the micro level since it relates to the properties of relationships. Factors such as norms and identity operating at higher levels are shared understandings not necessarily embedded in specific relationships but generally understood so are cognitive. An exception could be the relational properties of networks of institutions.	All cognitive micro level factors Thin/generalised trust Norms and sanctions Identity and belonging <i>Similar to group or organisational culture</i>
<b>Macro</b> Factors that are generally relevant and widely applicable to a community or society	Coordinating institutions Law and enforcement Generalised patterns of institutional collaboration Structures and systems that perpetuate social stratification		All cognitive micro level factors Thin/generalised trust Norms and sanctions Identity and belonging Shared understandings that perpetuate social stratification <i>Similar to culture and mores</i>

Table I Factors relevant to the different dimensions of social capital at different levels of analysis.

network capital and is either seen as a form of social capital or treated as a separate concept in an attempt to distance the work from the conceptual mess of social capital (Legh-Jones & Moore, 2012; Lin & Erickson, 2010; Wellman & Frank, 2001).

Social capital is plagued by complexity and conceptual ambiguity (Inaba, 2013; Membiela-Pollán & Pena-López, 2017; Tzanakis, 2013). The concept has been applied in virtually every discipline in the social sciences and often in different ways (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Epistemological differences between disciplines tends to result in different conceptual foundations and vastly different interpretations of what the term means and how it is conceptualised.

It must be noted that this article takes an epistemological approach that may not allow for all conceptual differences to be reconciled. For example, this article does not take a resource approach so does not consider the existence or availability of resources to be 'socially mobilised' (for more discussion of the resource approach see Fulkerson & Thompson, 2008). Instead under this conceptualisation social capital relates to the potential or propensity for action (for more explanation see Julien, 2015). Despite this specific epistemological approach, scholars from all social science disciplines should be able to position their own theoretical approach within the presented typology.

### **A typology of levels and dimensions of social capital**

This article presents a typology for understanding the factors that are relevant to each dimension at each level of analysis (see Table 1). This allows for different approaches to be understood within the context of other approaches. For example, when an author conceptualises social capital as relating to networks, we can understand what factors and dimensions are being included and which are being omitted. This improves our understanding of different approaches and the key differences between them.

### **Discussion of social capital levels and dimensions typology**

Table 1 is a useful conceptual tool, however, since reality cannot be separated into distinct boxes the distinctions represented in the table in practice are highly complex, interrelated, and overlapping. Many of these factors could be differently located within the matrix for various reasons. Any level or dimension cannot be considered in isolation and neither micro- nor macro-focused analysis alone is sufficient.

Lower levels must be considered within the context of higher levels since they influence and provide the context or framework for lower levels. For example, meso level social norms and generalised trust within a social grouping such as an organisation strongly influence the nature of micro level social relationships of its members. Another example is social stratification and mobility which is a macro level factor that systematically affects individuals and the nature of

their relationships at the micro level. Individuals, and their relationships, exist within, and are influenced by, the wider social setting in which they are embedded. Social relationships are influenced by the nature of interpersonal interaction (micro level) and various aspects of their social setting (meso and macro levels).

Table 1 defines the micro level as involving social relationships, meso as relating to social groupings, and macro as groupings of groupings. These levels relate to scale, but not necessarily geographic scale since with communication technologies social groupings are no longer limited to spatial distributions. Generally, lower levels involve fewer people and higher levels involve more people. The micro level is akin to the individual perspective, the meso level to a family, interest group, small organisation or sub-organisational unit, and macro level to a large organisation, community, or society.

Rather than seeing macro as the aggregate of micro, the table illustrates how some factors may aggregate to contribute to higher levels, but others stand alone as aspects of social structure and organisation separate to the individual and individual relationships. This view provides an alternative to social capital approaches that rely on aggregation that tends to obscure diversity and overly simplify complexity.

Each level should not be considered explicitly differentiated from other levels. They should be used as a general rubric for understanding and analysing different aspects of social capital at different levels. For this reason, this article has adopted the distinction between micro level factors related to, or embedded in, specific social relationships, meso level factors that are applicable in the context of a social grouping, and macro level factors that are generally relevant and widely applicable to a community or society.

At all levels it is important to acknowledge difference and diversity. Everyone is different, every relationship has unique characteristics, and every social grouping has their own identity, norms, shared understandings that exist within broader community, cultural and societal norms, and structures. For these reasons social capital is not homogenous. When aspects of social capital are averaged or aggregated, they can lose meaning, significance, and relevance. At the macro level it is important to not lose sight of the multitude of overlapping and interrelated fields<sup>2</sup>. This emphasises the generally relevant and widely applicable nature of macro level factors.

At the micro level individuals have some degree of control over 'their' social capital. It is possible for an individual to invest in their social capital and it is relevant to describe a person's social capital, not that it is exclusively owned by the individual, but that there are various exclusive characteristics that vary between individuals. Different individuals enjoy different social networks, reputation, goodwill, social status, and power, and their actions have direct implications for

<sup>2</sup> Field is a sociological concept for a social arena in which agents and their social positions are located (Bourdieu, 1977).

their social capital. Social capital clearly has individual properties however these are embedded within the wider collective to which the individual belongs.

As the scale increases individuals have commensurately less control over relevant factors since they become just one of many social actors, each with different influence and power, and beliefs and values become more routinised and institutionalised. Therefore, lower levels are often considered to be more dynamic and changeable since factors are created and recreated through every action and interaction. At higher levels social capital tends to be more grounded in history, culture and established institutional structures that tend to change more slowly (except in the case of sudden social change).

The following sections briefly discuss and provide some explanation for each category in table 1.

### Micro Structural

The 'micro structural' section of Table 1 includes the aspects of the structural dimension of social capital that are most relevant at the micro level of analysis. There is general agreement that the essence of social capital involves social relationships. Regardless of how social capital is conceptualised, networks of social relationships are a crucial component of the concept.

From some perspectives, social capital is *only* manifested by social interaction, which is greatly enhanced and facilitated by social relationships. Certainly, the importance of social relationships to social capital cannot be understated since interaction between known individuals (i.e. those with existing relationships) is vastly different to interactions among strangers. Social interaction is also critical to the creation of social meaning so is vital to the relational and cognitive dimensions.

Many authors distinguish between bonding and bridging types of network ties (Coffé & Geys, 2007). This typology distinguishes between relationships within a group or community (bonding) and those relationships that span social groups (bridging) (Putnam, 2000). It is common to ascribe relational characteristics to each type. Bonding ties are assumed to be strong ties with thick trust among people who are alike. Bridging ties are assumed to be weak ties with thin trust among people who are different (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

Thin trust is often termed "generalised" or "social" trust and relates to trust between strangers (Scrivens, 2013). Since thin trust is not embedded in social relationships it is a cognitive factor located at the meso and macro levels. This means that authors who ascribe characteristics to the bonding/bridging distinction include in their conceptualisation of social capital some extra-relational factors that relate to the wider social setting and structure, even if they do not do so intentionally. Although it appears that they take a micro approach, the inescapable interrelationships between dimensions and levels typically mean other levels and dimensions are included.

This also highlights the interrelationships between levels and dimensions. All social relationships are influenced by the nature of repeat interactions between the individuals as well as various meso and macro level factors. Social relationships do not exist in isolation. Meso level factors such as norms, roles, rules, generalised trust, belonging, and various shared understandings provide the framework or background context.

In strong relationships these higher-level factors may remain little more than background context and have little impact on the nature of the relationship. However, in weaker relationships these higher-level factors tend to play an important role in shaping the nature of the relationships. There are likely several factors involved, however, generally the influence of higher-level factors (meso and macro level<sup>3</sup>) would increase towards the boundary of one's social network (social relationships involving infrequent, incidental, or insignificant contact).

What defines the boundary of one's social network? For instance, is the guy at my local café part of my social network if I do not know his name or anything about him other than his job serving me coffee? There are various relational and cognitive properties of our 'relationship' generated from repeat interaction. If he is part of my social network, then how big is my social network? If I stop going to the café, or if he stops working there, for how long would he still be considered part of my social network?

These questions relate to highly subjective and intangible issues. A possible solution is to consider the differing role of micro level factors and meso/macro level factors in influencing the nature of the relationship and interaction. If we treat close relationships being primarily based on micro level factors and weaker relationships being increasingly based on higher level factors, then it does not really matter how we define whether someone is a social network contact or not. In practice there may be little difference between an infrequent and incidental contact and a stranger.

As previously noted, reality cannot be separated into distinct boxes. It could be debated whether "network characteristics" are best located in the micro structural category in Table 1. Network characteristics include factors such as density, bridges, structural holes, and homogeneity (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009) that tend to involve many individuals so could be meso level. However, as they relate to networks of specific individuals separate to social groupings and cut across all relevant social groupings for any given individual or group of individuals they do not fit with factors that are applicable in the context of a social grouping. For that reason, network characteristics relate to specific individuals and social relationships rather than a specific social grouping. However, if the practical interest is a social grouping then this factor would be meso level.

<sup>3</sup> Higher level refers to overarching factors that influence micro level. It should be noted that these meso and macro level factors provide the foundation for understandings so the term higher level may be confusing.



Associational membership is often mentioned as an important aspect of social capital and is consistent with Robert Putnam's work on civic participation (for example see Putnam, 1995). It seems to fit best as a micro level structural factor because although it represents membership and therefore participation in formalised social groupings, it relates to an individual more than the social grouping.

Micro structural factors are sometimes called network capital (Legh-Jones & Moore, 2012; Wellman & Frank, 2001) and for some approaches to social capital this is the only group of factors that are relevant. This approach is typically called the network approach to social capital (Adam & Roncevic, 2003). The network approach is a well-established theoretical approach that treats social capital as an individual resource that consists of the networks of relations (Membiela-Pollán & Pena-López, 2017). One of the key scholars of the network approach is Nan Lin who built on the work of Bourdieu (Claridge, 2004).

An easy to understand and intuitive way to think about the micro structural category is as social connectedness. It involves people knowing each other. It is the existence of social networks of contacts, friends, family, and acquaintances.

### Meso Structural

This section continues with discussion of the structural dimension of social capital and explores the factors that are relevant at the meso level of analysis. The meso level relates to social groupings that are comprised of individuals. Humans create and identify with various social groupings and each grouping tends to have its own structure, rules, procedures, norms, and shared understandings. We feel belonging to a multitude of social groupings and our association in each creates social meaning that collectively create our lifeworld<sup>4</sup>. For example, I could be a member of my family, my neighbourhood, my former university, my local church, my sporting groups, my employer, my profession, my interest groups, and many more. All of these 'fields' overlap and interrelate. It is common to have social relationships with people who belong to multiple social groupings and who hold different roles in different groups and with the nature of interactions prescribed by different rules, norms, and shared understandings.

The structural dimension at the meso level relates to the structure of the social grouping. This could be conceived as the skeletal structure of the group or organization (Mask, 2018). It tends to be formalised at least to some extent, and it often exists independently of individuals; formalised into roles, rules, procedures, and documents such as charters or constitutions. Individuals can join and leave the organisation but the structure remains largely unchanged. This structure dictates the existence and nature of many social relationships and powerfully influences the nature of

<sup>4</sup> Lifeworld is the background resources, contexts, and dimensions of social action that enable actors to co-operate on the basis of mutual understanding (Habermas, 1984).

interaction and exchange between individuals. For example, the creation of roles in a social grouping creates patterns of interaction between individuals who may not have otherwise interacted. These roles create powerful social meanings that influence various aspects of social capital.

The structure also creates obligations and expectations, and establishes patterns of action that are commonly understood by group members, thereby reducing uncertainty in ways that strongly influence various aspects of social capital. The structural dimension of social capital is more tangible than the other dimensions since many of the artefacts of group structure exist in documentation and the design and use of physical spaces. Most aspects of the structural dimension tend to exist above the horizon of member's lifeworld since they do not require reflection to elucidate their meaning and significance<sup>5</sup>. For example, members of a group are generally aware of the organisational structure and the resulting roles, rules, obligations, and expectations. Members are fully aware of who has superiority and the obligations and expectations dictated by their role. For example, it requires little to no reflection to know that Jane is your boss and her instructions are legitimate expectations of behaviour. The other dimensions of social capital tend to have more pre-reflective character since they tend to be based on presuppositions and the background context of knowing, acting, and thinking.

When people are asked about aspects of the structural dimension they normally can readily provide details without much reflection. For example, most people can immediately report details of organisational structure, rules, and policies. However, the other dimensions of social capital often require deeper reflection to find the meaning and significance of their presuppositions. For example, someone may 'know' that it is not appropriate to eat lunch in front of the shop where they work, but when asked for details and rationale they may need to reflect to uncover the background context of this presupposition.

It could be debated that roles should be a micro level factor since they apply to an individual, however, a role is tied to a social group context so creates understandings that are most relevant in the group context. This factor is an example of a higher-level factor that would be highly relevant to the analysis of individual social capital.

Networks of institutions are included at this level since it is common for institutions to have formal or informal relationships with other institutions that transcend specific individual members of the institutions. Examples of highly formalised relationships include those between different departments of the same organisation, different sporting teams that are part of the same league, or different shops of the same company. It can include formalised certification, membership, and contracted partnerships. Informal

<sup>5</sup> Since the lifeworld is mostly pre-reflective, it is considered to exist mostly below the horizon of one's awareness; out of sight as it were. It is the background context.

relationships are common in supplier relationships between businesses and can also include generalised or routinised patterns of interaction between institutions.

An important distinction is whether the relationship between the institutions is based on a personal relationship between individuals or whether the connection persists beyond the relationships of individual people. In the case of the former this is an example of a bridging tie and would be most relevant at the micro level.

### Macro Structural

Macro structural factors are generally relevant and widely applicable beyond the level of the smaller social grouping. They tend to be related to groups of groups, communities, and society including the level of the nation and supranational associations. These factors relate to macro social structure and the institutions humans create to organise and regulate social action.

Humans are social and we have developed large complex societies that require structure and organisation to solve complicated problems of coordination, allocation, and efficiency and to avoid free-rider and exploitive behaviours. Humans establish rules, assign roles, appoint enforcers, and develop complex systems. Moral and cultural values are formalised into these structures that establish standards of thought, speech and action.

At the macro level these structures include the various government and non-government institutions including legal, judicial and law enforcement institutions. Collectively we could call them 'coordinating institutions'. This term is similar to the concept of institutional capacity (Engbers, Thompson, & Slaper, 2017). These coordinating institutions help to regulate the nature of human interaction and define the 'rules of the game' (Keefer & Knack, 2008).

There are clear relationships between laws and social norms (Posner, 1996; Sunstein, 1996) with laws, rules, and regulations providing powerful signals for the development of social norms and social sanctions at all levels. These macro social structures help to reduce uncertainty by creating a commonly-understood and relatively stable understanding of social reality. They create expectations and obligations and the confidence that non-compliance is sanctionable, either by informal social sanctions or formal judicial systems.

The combined nature of coordinating institutions and the resulting laws, rules and regulations tends to create powerful structures of social stratification. Example can include class, race, gender, education, nationality, geography, and various other factors that are institutionalised into social structures.

The macro level factors are sometimes called *civic capital*, particularly by authors who use the network approach to social capital and want to differentiate between their definition of social capital and the 'capital' associated with the wider social setting (Guiso et al., 2010).

### Micro Relational

While it is common to distinguish between three dimensions of social capital, some authors use a two-dimensional approach, either structural and relational or structural and cognitive (for example see Uphoff, 1999). In these cases, the relational and cognitive terms are often approximately equivalent, but some authors use them to relate to norms, values, attitudes, and belief and others to the characteristics of social relationships.

In the three-dimension system the relational dimension relates to the characteristics and qualities of social relationships whereas cognitive relates to shared understandings that provide systems of meaning (Lee, Wong, & Chong, 2005). In practice these are similar since both relate to beliefs and understandings. The difference is that relational factors relate to specific social relationships while cognitive factors are more broadly shared understandings.

While micro structural factors relate to the configuration of social networks, micro relational factors relate to the nature of these relationships. The existence of a network tie does not dictate anything about its qualities. Repeat interactions between people and the interpreted meaning of these interactions creates various understandings that influence the nature of future interactions (Feigenberg, Field, & Pande, 2010). A relationship can become imbued with trust, norms of reciprocity, obligations, and expectations, and various routinised or habituated patterns of action and interaction.

These relational properties tend to be dynamic given that they are created and recreated with every action and interaction. Repeat interactions can establish relational trust however a single betrayal of trust can create significant and lasting distrust. Generally, negative interactions tend to have more significant implications than positive interactions. The nature of the interaction is important but perhaps what is more important is how it is interpreted within the context of the wider social setting and the individual's lifeworld. These relational properties also change over time in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. For example, is a long-lost friend from high school afforded more or less trustworthiness now than the day you graduated? What role does nostalgia and nostalgic belonging play? Or has time faded any certainty about your friends trustworthiness? Or do negative associations about high school transfer to the individuals involved?

These micro relational factors are essentially cognitive in that they are stored in the thoughts, feelings, and understandings of the individuals involved. In Table I these properties that are directly related to relationships between individuals are considered relational. It could be debated that identity and identification should be a higher-level factor since they typically relate to belonging within a social grouping. However, identity and identification have relevance to specific social relationships separate to any social grouping so are included in this section.

Collectively the micro level relational factors could be considered similar to reputation and goodwill.

### Meso and Macro Relational

The relational dimension is generally not applicable above the micro level of analysis. Within the context of the conceptualisation used in this article, the properties of social relationships (relational dimension) are the domain of the micro level since they are factors related to, or embedded in, social relationships. At the meso and macro levels of analysis the relational dimension could be considered the aggregate of the micro level since social groupings are comprised of individuals and their relationships. However, this article defines the meso level as factors that are applicable in the context of a social grouping and this is not the same as the characteristics of individual social relationships.

As Coleman (1990) discussed, care should be taken when making the micro-to-macro transition. The characteristics of individual relationships do not necessarily correspond to the characteristics of the group to which the individuals belong. For example, it is possible for most individuals in a social grouping to have trusting relationships with each other but to lack the propensity to be trusting in the context of the group. Trust is a complex phenomenon that is not universally applicable since it has context; A trusts B to do X (Hardin, 1993). The X can be linked to a social context so it tends to be A trusts B to do X in Y social context. Social groups develop different habitus<sup>6</sup> and this is very important in shaping action (Bottero, 2009). Interpretations change in the context of the lifeworld of the social group (Habermas, 1984). Therefore, propensity to trust in a social context is dependent on factors related to the social grouping, not just the nature of individual relationships.

There is evidence that social trust operating at the meso level may influence the nature of relational trust at the micro level (Robbins, 2016), however, relational trust is not the same as social trust so we cannot aggregate relational trust and call it social trust. The relationships between trust embedded in social relationships (micro) and trust that is applicable to a social grouping (meso) are likely to involve multiple complex causalities.

The relational dimension factors such as trust, norms, and identity operating at higher levels are shared understandings not necessarily embedded in specific relationships but generally understood. An exception could be the relational properties of networks of institutions. As noted in the meso structural section, networks of institutions can exist separate to individual relationships and these networks can have similar relational properties to the micro level. Networks of institutions could be considered cognitive since these factors, if not formalised in institutional arrangements, exist as shared understandings held by members of the social grouping.

### Micro Cognitive

The cognitive dimension of social capital relates to shared understandings that provide systems of meaning. They are therefore less tangible than structural factors since they exist in people's mental constructs, hence the term cognitive. This dimension has many similarities to sociological concepts such as habitus, lifeworld, and worldview and relates to the social construction of reality (for example see Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bolton, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Habermas, 1987; Sitton, 2003).

The cognitive factors are similar at all levels of analysis since the only difference is the level at which the understanding is shared. Micro level cognitive factors are shared by individuals who have existing social relationships whereas higher level factors are shared at the level of the social grouping.

It could be argued that micro level cognitive factors should be in the relational dimension since the understandings are embedded in specific relationships and for this reason relate to the character of the relationship. There is clearly overlap between the dimensions and in this case, it could be placed in either dimension. As cognitive factors are shared understandings rather than relational properties they seems to fit better in the cognitive column.

Authors who locate social capital as the property of the individual will tend to focus on the structural dimension and individual agency, whereas authors who see social capital as the property of the collective tend to focus on the cognitive dimension.

### Meso Cognitive

Through the processes of socialisation and enculturation individuals develop a socially constructed understanding of reality that powerfully shapes the nature of action and interaction with others. This understanding is uniquely created by each person through their own experiences and the cumulative interpretation of events. It is however partially shared with others since we collectively experience meso and macro level factors. We also develop shared understandings through interaction and communication with others.

This is similar to Bourdieu's concept of habitus; the assumptions, habits, taken-for-granted ideas and ways of being that are the vehicles through which agents engage with, understand and move on through the world (Bourdieu, 1977).

Shared understandings can reduce uncertainty associated with interaction and exchange and therefore tends to lubricate collective action. Shared understandings create powerful feelings of belonging and shared purpose which provide motivation for cooperation and collaboration.

As noted by various authors, social capital can have positive and negative outcomes (Portes & Landolt, 1996). Many of the negative outcomes of social capital tend

<sup>6</sup> Habitus is the assumptions, habits, taken-for-granted ideas and ways of being (Bourdieu, 1977)



to stem from ingroup and outgroup effects that arise from belonging to social groupings and the fundamental processes of social identification (Pillai, Hodgkinson, Kalyanaram, & Nair, 2017). Sense of belonging is often mentioned in social capital conceptualisations, however, few authors seem to appreciate its importance and significance. The theoretical foundations of ingroup and outgroup affects are well established in psychology, but as yet social capital has not been widely applied by the psychology discipline. Therefore, identity and belonging are often under-appreciated in analysis, including its importance and consequences for reputation (for example in a workplace where negative reputation could result in loss of employment). Social identification processes underpin all three dimensions of social capital in important ways (Pillai et al., 2017).

Collectively the meso level cognitive factors could be thought of as similar to group or organisational culture.

### Macro Cognitive

The macro level factors are generally relevant and widely applicable by large social groupings such as large organisations, communities, and society. The cognitive factors at this level are commonly understood background understandings that are similar to culture and mores<sup>7</sup>. They provide the background context for thought and action and are ingrained into aspects of everyday life, and social organisation and structure. The macro level factors are the same as the lower levels and include shared language, codes, narratives, values, attitudes, beliefs, and belonging associated with social identity. They relate to the shared experience of a large social grouping such as a community or nation, and identification with this grouping, such as patriotism and nationalism.

There can be significant variation in the nature of the cognitive dimension between different social groupings, different regions, and social strata. Shared understandings can develop differently in sub-groups and sub-regions, and different people in different contexts can experience these factors very differently. For example, the experiences and understandings of people in a rural area can be vastly different to those of people living in an urban area. Localised events can also have significant impacts on cognitive factors. For example, a major oil spill can create significant impacts for the experience and understandings of the local population that can shape the nature of the cognitive dimension. Events can also influence the way people in other areas view people from the affected area, which further reinforces social identity. These types of localised understandings can be based on geographic, ethnic, religious, gendered, and potentially any other type of social stratification. For example, someone can be “from the wrong side of the tracks”, or people can attribute understandings to a race, religion, gender, or other characteristic. This means that cognitive factors

at the macro level can be diverse and experienced differently by different social groups.

At the macro level it is important to understand any generalisations and how these macro shared understandings influence different groups and individuals differently. These factors are influenced by history and culture and are beliefs and values that are widely held, many of which are formalised into aspects of the structural dimension. These factors tend to change slowly relative to lower level factors since they are shared understandings held by large numbers of people and closely related to formalised and institutionalised structural factors.

### Limitations of this approach and missing factors

This article has presented a framework for understanding the different dimensions of social capital at different levels of analysis. It allows for different approaches to be understood within the broader context of social capital and which factors different approaches tend to focus on.

It may however, be impossible to reconcile the epistemological differences between different disciplines and approaches to social capital. Table 1 may allow some mapping of the differences such that certain perspectives can be situated within the wider context. However, this has limited value since the table itself takes a specific epistemological perspective, potentially inhibiting meaning being derived for other knowledge systems.

For example, table 1 includes factors that shape social action and interaction. It treats social capital as the beliefs, values and attitudes that create a potential for action. It considers any action to be an outcome of social capital, so does not treat social capital as having positive or negative properties. It does not consider the role of individual character and competencies and it does not account for the existence of resources to be mobilised, created, or value-added.

Further, there are numerous factors that are important sources of social capital that are not referenced because they contribute to or influence one of the listed factors directly or indirectly. For example, the built environment is an important source of social capital since it influences social interaction, but it is not included in the table because it contributes, along with various other factors, to the listed aspects.

This conceptual framework may help to improve understanding of the differences between approaches to social capital and different levels of analysis. It is important to recognise that this is a general rubric only and that reality is highly complex, interrelated and overlapping. When operationalised, the context will determine what factors are relevant and how different levels interact with the context of interest.

<sup>7</sup> Mores are standards of behaviour that are widely observed within a society or culture. Mores determine what is considered morally acceptable or unacceptable within any given culture.



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